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WORCESTER'S OLD COMMON

Worcester's Old Common

Remarks made at the annual banquet of the Worcester Board of Trade, April 19, 1901, by

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Worcester's Old Common, with Some of Its Neighbors and Incidents.

FROM the "Records of the Proprietors" it appears that in May, 1667, a Committee was appointed by the General Court to view the "Country near the Quinsigamond Ponds," with the intention of establishing a settlement there, and a few small houses were erected soon after. In June, 1669, the Committee passed the following vote: "Ordered:

"Agreed, That their bee a place rreserued in comon nearre the centerr of the towne conenient forr that purrpose about twenty aceres forr a trayning place & to set a scoole house vpon as nearre as may be wherre the meeting house shalbe placed."

A settlement, however, was not effected till 1673, but, owing to trouble with the Indians, it was soon abandoned, and was not finally established till 1713.

The twenty acres set apart for the Common had been reduced by sale, so that in 1732, when a survey was made by order of the Proprietors, only about eleven or twelve acres remained. From this had been set off to Capt. Moses Rice a lot of about half an acre, fronting on the Main street, now covered by the Walker Building. Capt. Rice came to Worcester from Sudbury and became an influential citizen, and on the lot set off to him built the first tavern in Worcester, about 1719 or 1720, and a public house was kept on that spot for the next twenty years. Capt. Rice afterwards removed to Rutland, Mass., where he was killed by the Indians in 1755.

The Common then extended from Park street on the south to Mechanic street on the north, and east to Salem square and Church street, with the exception of the half-acre owned by Capt. Rice.

Soon after the establishment of Worcester county, in 1731, there came to Worcester a man who was to become an important factor in the business and municipal life of the town. This was John

Chandler of Woodstock*, who later held many important offices. He represented Worcester in the General Court in 1732, 1735, 1738, 1739, 1752 and 1753. He was also a selectman, town treasurer and the first clerk of the courts for Worcester county. In 1742 the Rice tavern lot on the Common was bought by Mr. Chandler, who had come into possession of land adjoining. He died in 1762, his death being noticed in the Boston News Letter of Aug. 12 of that year. His remains were placed in the Chandler tomb on the Common, which, with the Dix tomb, was a little to the south of the Soldiers Monument. I well remember these tombs, which were not removed till after the brick school house on the east end of the Common was built.

Mr. Chandler's son, Col. John Chandler, who came to Worcester a boy of about eleven years of age, succeeded to some of the offices held by his father. He was town treasurer 1753-1760, town clerk 1764-1768, county treasurer 1762-1775, sheriff of Worcester county 1751-1762, and judge of probate from 1762 to 1774.

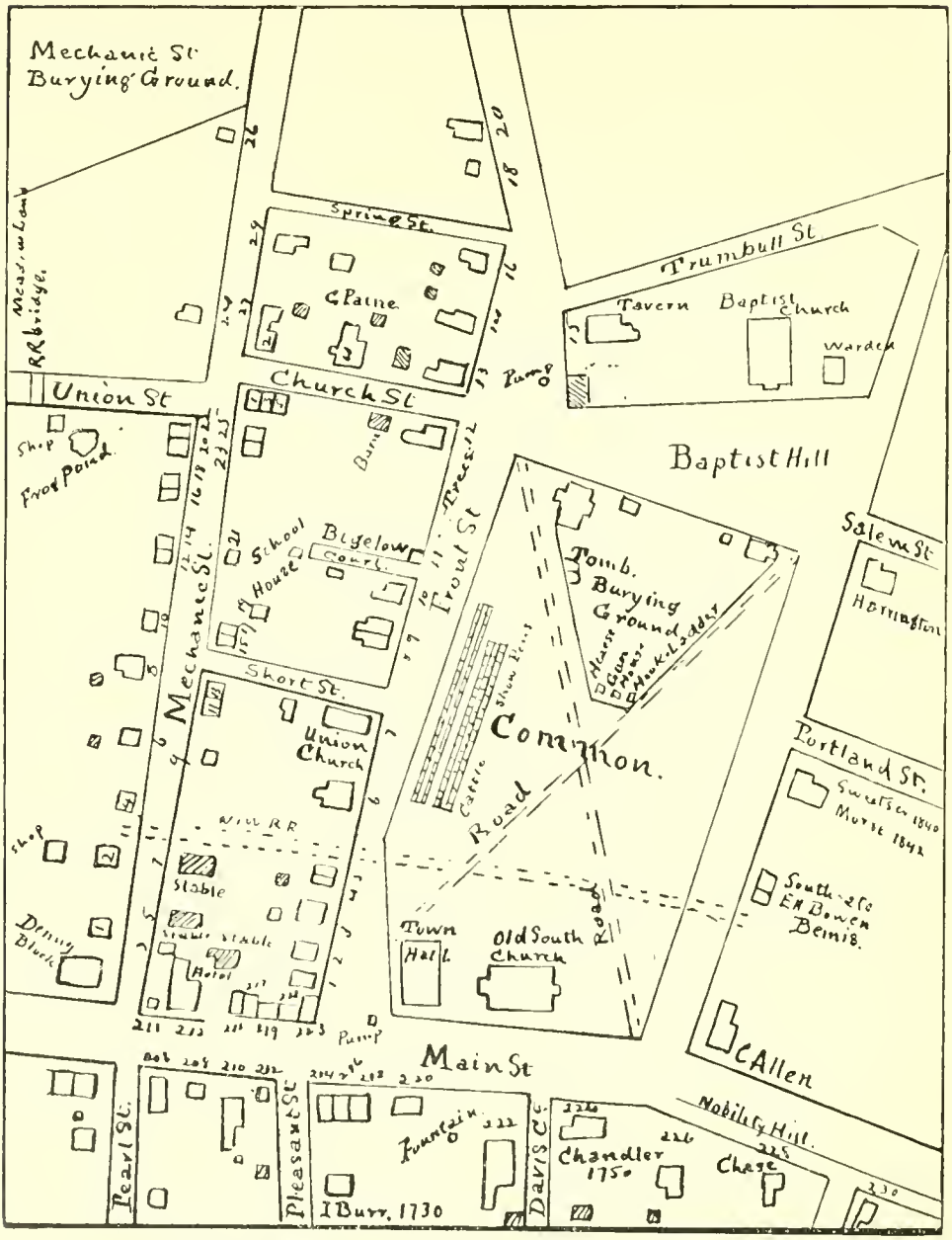
A fine mansion had been erected, with barns and other buildings, and Col.

*Till 1749 a part of Worcester county. Though the town in that year changed her allegiance to Connecticut, the respective states long wrangled over the matter.

A ROUGH DIAGRAM OF THE COMMON AND ADJACENT STREETS,

WORCESTER, MASS.

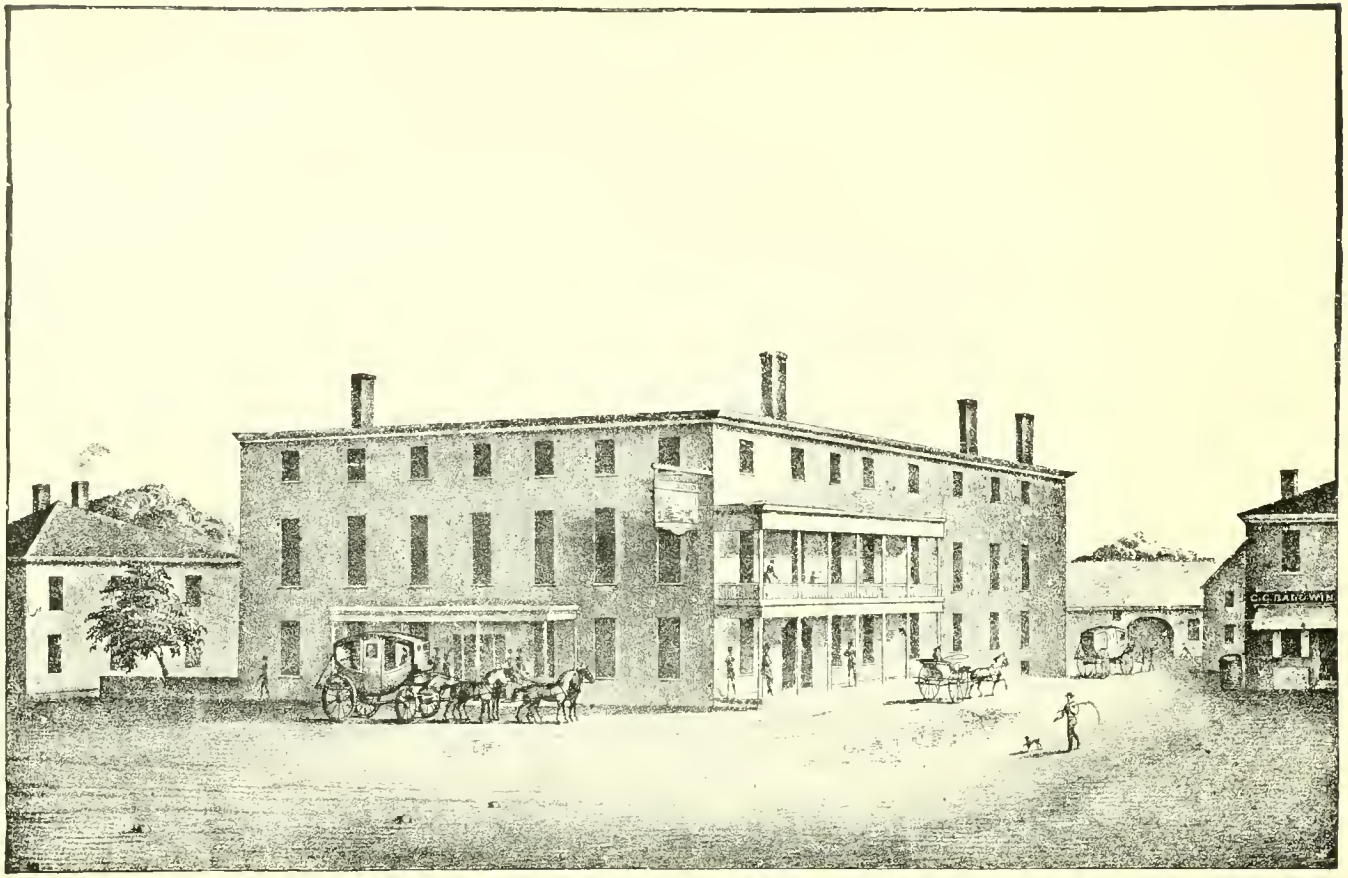
1839-43.



[The Isaac Burr house shown on diagram, should have been represented nearer Main St., about opposite the entrance to Judge Paine's yard.]

Chandler resided there until just before the beginning of the War of the Revolution, at which time he went to England with other loyalists, and died there in the year 1800. He was known in England as the "Honest Refugee," on account of the justness of his claims for losses sustained by his espousal of the royalist cause, in comparison with the extravagant claims of others. After he left the country his name was placed in the list of absentees, and his property confiscated; the mansion house and land with some other property were assigned to Mrs. Chandler as her dower, she remaining in the country.

Col. Chandler was one of the largest contributors to the building of the Old South meeting house, and was given the first choice of a pew. He chose a wall pew on the minister's right hand. The one on the left was taken by one Lieut. Jacob Hemenway, who chose it because there was a door opening to a place under the pulpit, where he kept a barrel of cider for use at Sunday noonings. John Adams (afterwards President of the United States), who taught school in Worcester in 1757, often speaks of Col. Chandler in his diary, says he saw a great deal of him, and once went on a special service for him to the Governor of Rhode Island.



UNITED STATES HOTEL.

North End of Old Compound

The description of Col. Chandler's property, once a part of the Common, as lately taken from the English records, was as follows: "Thirty rods north easterly from the meeting house about one acre. Bounded north westerly on the County road (Main street), south easterly on the ministerial land, south westerly on the town common, or road leading from said meeting house to Grafton (Front street). Together with one large upright dwelling house, two barns, a cow barn, a large store and a tenement formerly used as an office, also other buildings."

After Mrs. Chandler's death, in 1783, some of her children continued to reside in the house, probably till about 1790. The property in 1786 was formally conveyed to the heirs-at-law of Col. Chandler, by a special act of the General Court, and they, in 1789, conveyed it to Samuel Chandler, one of the sons. In 1803 he sold it to Capt. Ephraim Mower, who had occupied the house as a tavern since 1791. In 1818 the estate was purchased by William Hovey*, who took down the old house and erected a brick one in its place. This was known as the "Worcester hotel," and later as the United States

*Mr. Hovey was at one time a manufacturer of hay-cutters on Summer street.

hotel, removed in 1855 to make room for Clark's block*. Among the landlords of the United States hotel were James Worthington, the late William C. Clark and Charles Sibley, the present crier of the court.

In 1757 Col. Chandler marched from the Common to the relief of Fort William Henry. In October, 1760, so says the Boston News Letter, the mansion of Col. Chandler at Worcester was brilliantly illuminated on account of the success of His Majesty's arms by the taking of Montreal by Lord Amherst.

It was from the Chandler house, in 1786, that the Rev. Aaron Bancroft, just called to settle over the Second parish in Worcester, was married to Lucretia Chandler, daughter of Col. Chandler, and for a while occupied the house. It was in the fall or winter of 1786, at the time of the famous Shays rebellion, when the leader of the insurgents demanded that some of his men should be admitted to the Chandler house, that Dr. Bancroft refused to admit them, saying they could not come in except over his dead body.

Another of the Chandler family, who occupied a part of the original Common, having a store near the corner of Main and Front streets, was Clark Chandler,

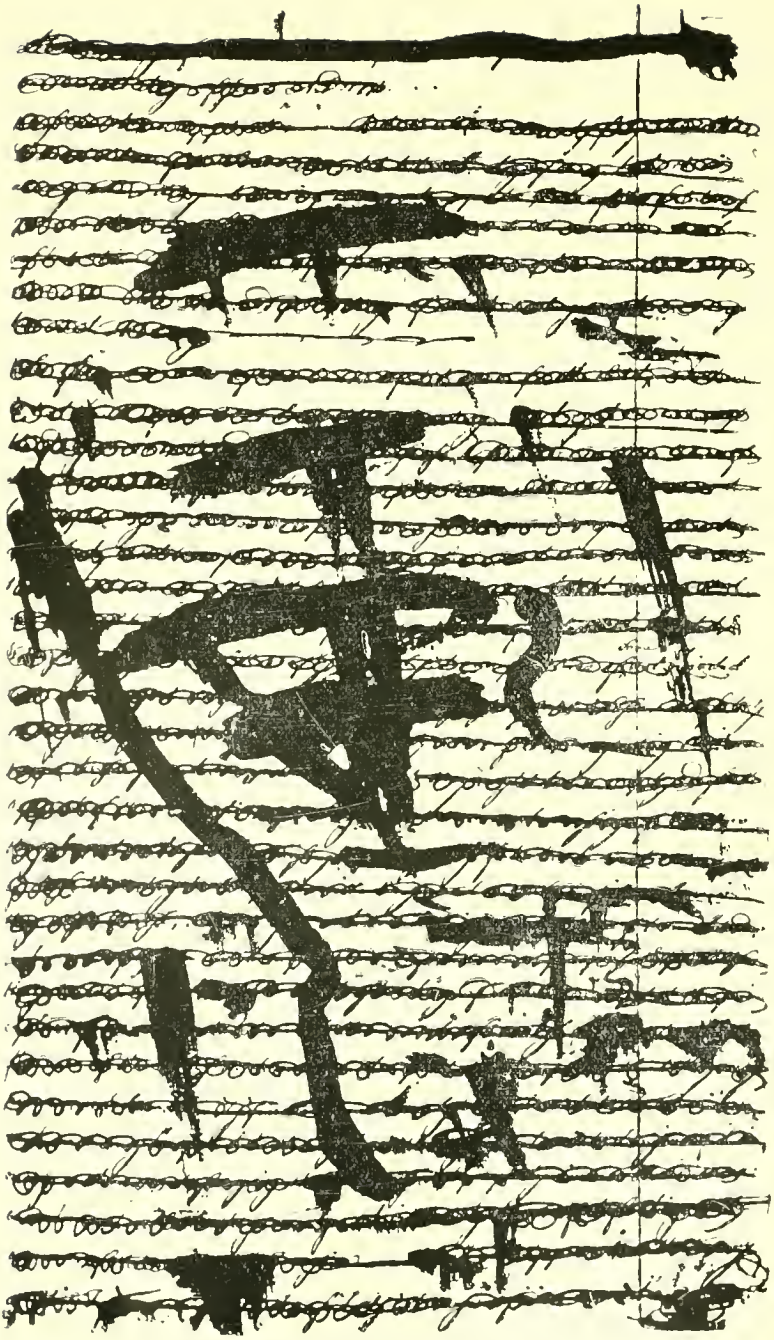
*The old structure was removed to Mechanic street, and taken down to make way for the Crompton block, built in 1869.

the loyalist town clerk, from 1768 to 1775, who, in 1774, entered upon the town records the famous protest of the loyalists against the resolutions adopted by the town in May of that year regarding the use and importation of tea. The store occupied by Mr. Chandler was afterwards known as the old compound and was moved to Pleasant street, where the Rogers block now is.

The acceptance of the protest was refused by the town, but Chandler, the town clerk, himself among the signers of the protest, as were several of his relatives and friends, copied it on the records and also sent a copy to Boston for publication.

As soon as the Whigs discovered that this protest had been entered upon the town records, they were very excited and indignant with the clerk for having, as they claimed, exceeded his powers, and insulted the town by his procedure. A petition was at once presented to the selectmen, asking them to call a special meeting to take action upon the unwarrantable proceeding of the clerk.

At a meeting held the 24th of August, 1774, resolutions, prepared by a committee previously appointed, were adopted, denouncing the protest of the Tories in the strongest terms; and as it appeared "that the same is recorded in the town



DEFACED PAGE OF TOWN RECORDS.

book, notwithstanding the many aspersions against the people of this town, and without the liberty or knowledge of the town"; therefore it was

"Voted that the town clerk do, in the presence of the town, obliterate, erase, or otherwise deface the said recorded protest, and the names thereto subscribed, so that it may become utterly illegible and unintelligible."

The clerk, thereupon, in open meeting, with his pen defaced the pages upon which the obnoxious record was made; but this not proving satisfactory to the patriotic voters then assembled, he was made to dip his fingers into the ink and draw them across the records, so effectually accomplishing the object that the words have indeed become utterly illegible, as may be seen by an inspection of the volume in the hands of the city clerk.

A vote was also passed by the town reprimanding and admonishing Mr. Chandler for the course he had taken. This much about that part of the Common now covered by substantial buildings and entirely given up to the demands of business.

Encroachments upon the Common, as originally laid out, have been made from time to time, so that it is now reduced to about seven acres. The gun house and hearse house were in the center of the Common for many years*.

*They stood a little to the west of the present location of the Col. Timothy Bigelow monument.

Fifty or sixty years ago there were two traveled roads across the Common—one from the northwest to the southeast corner, the other from the southwest corner, at the present junction of Main and Park streets, to the northeast corner, near the house of Capt. Daniel Goulding, which was in 1829 a tavern, kept by Nathaniel Eaton, and stood near the present location of Houghton's block.

Although much reduced in size, the Common continued to be a gathering place for the people, and events of historic interest often occurred within its limits, of which a few will be briefly alluded to.

In August, 1774, when the country was excited and indignant over the arbitrary acts of the British government, a large number of people of Worcester and the adjoining towns assembled on the Common, chose a committee to wait upon Timothy Paine, clerk of the courts and chairman of the selectmen, who had lately been appointed one of the mandamus councillors and demanded that he resign his office and promise that he would never act as councillor.

The committee called upon him at his house, on the west side of Lincoln street, a few rods from Lincoln square (the house is still standing) and insisted that

he should appear before the people assembled on the common and there read his resignation. This he did, and was afterwards allowed to return to his home, after being treated with great indignity. It was in the Timothy Paine house that John Adams (afterwards President of the United States) used to visit, and to which he often alludes in his diary.

The people of the town became greatly excited upon public affairs, and set about preparing for a struggle which, they felt, would soon be forced upon them; and they foresaw that, so arbitrary and intolerant had become the requirements of the home government, that the result was likely to be a separation from Great Britain.

That they might be better prepared for the impending conflict, the patriotic citizens of Worcester organized a company of minute men, who drilled on the Common or in the streets, half a day of each week, for which they were allowed by the town compensation of one shilling per man for each half day of service.

On the 19th of April one hundred and twenty-six years ago (1775), the news of the attack on Lexington and the fight at Concord was brought to Worcester by a special messenger. He rode through the Main street to the Common, calling upon our citizens to take

up arms in defence of their country. In response the minute men promptly assembled there.

Capt. Timothy Bigelow took command and after a fervent prayer by Rev. Thaddeus Maccarty, minister of the Old South church, amid the ringing of bells and firing of cannon, the brave little band of patriotic citizens were soon on their way to lend their aid to their fellow countrymen of Lexington and Concord. The same day another company, under command of Capt. Benjamin Flagg, followed, so that over one hundred men marched from Worcester Common that 19th of April, 1775.

Capt. Bigelow remained in active service during the war as colonel of the Massachusetts 15th regiment, which rendered most efficient service, only to be surpassed by the famous 15th regiment of the War of the Rebellion.

Eighty-six years later, the 19th of April, 1861, the anniversary of Col. Bigelow's departure for the war, a suitable monument to his memory was dedicated with appropriate ceremonies, having been erected by Col. Timothy Bigelow Lawrence of Boston.

The fact that Revolutionary soldiers were buried on the old Common has lately been recognized, and a suitable

memorial to their memory has been put up by the city council, prompted thereto by the city's patriotic societies.

Another episode of great historical interest which took place within the limits of the present Common was the reading of the Declaration of Independence from the porch of the Old South church.

The Declaration of Independence was passed by Congress on the evening of July 4, 1776, and signed on that day by President John Hancock and the secretary, Charles Thompson, but was not signed, in its completed form, by the members, till the second day of August following. Immediately after its passage, it was

"Resolved that copies of the Declaration be sent to the several assemblies, conventions, and Committees of Councils of Safety, and to the several commanding officers of the Continental troops, and that it be proclaimed in each of the United States and at the Head of the Army."

As soon, therefore, as copies could be printed, it was sent by couriers to the different States. Having been first publicly read at Philadelphia the 8th of July, it was received in New York, at Washington's headquarters, on the 9th and in the evening it was read at the headquarters of each brigade.

By some means, however, rumors of the passage of the act had reached Worcester in advance of the messenger with the printed copy, for in the "Massachusetts Spy" of July 10th was the following announcement:—

"It is reported that the Honorable Continental Congress have declared the American Colonies independent of the Monster of imperious domination and cruelty—Gerat Britain! Which we hope is true."

The confirmation of this rumor was received in Worcester on Saturday, the 13th, or Sunday, the 14th of July, and was read publicly for the first time in New England by Isaiah Thomas, the publisher of the Massachusetts Spy, from the roof of the west porch of the Old South meeting house, and also on Sunday, after service, in the house itself*.

Mr. Thomas, with true journalistic enterprise, intercepted the messenger of Congress on his way through the town, and secured a copy of the important document, and it was printed in the "Spy" of July 17, for the first time in any newspaper in Massachusetts. The Declaration was read in Boston on the 18th of

*The old porch was removed many years before the building itself was taken down, and for several years served as part of a house on Grafton street.

July, from the balcony of the State House, by Col. Thomas Crafts, to an immense concourse, including not only the loyal people, but many of the British officers and men who were held as prisoners in Boston. Four days later, the first public celebration of its adoption took place in Worcester, and is thus reported in the "Spy" of the 24th:

"On Monday last a number of patriotic gentlemen of this town, animated with a love of their country, and to show their approbation of the measures lately taken by the Grand Council of America, assembled on the Green, near the liberty pole, where, after having displayed the colors of the 13 Confederate Colonies of America, the bells were set aringing and the drums a beating, after which, the Declaration of Independence of the United States was read to a large and respectable body (among whom were the selectmen and committee of correspondence), assembled on the occasion, who testified their approbation by repeated huzzas, firing of musketry and cannon, bonfires and other demonstrations of joy; When the arms of that tyrant in Britain, George the III, of execrable memory, which in former times decorated, but of late disgraced the court house in this town, were committed to the flames and consumed to ashes; after which, a select company of the sons of freedom, repaired to the tavern, lately known by the sign of the King's Arms, which odious signa-

ture of despotism was taken down by order of the people, which was cheerfully complied with by the innkeeper. Toasts were offered upon this occasion, among which were the following:—

"Prosperity and perpetuity to the United States of America. The President of the Grand Council of America. The Grand Council of America. His excellency, George Washington. The Patriots of America. Every Friend of America. George rejected and liberty protected. Sore eyes to all the Tories and a chestnut burr for an eyestone. Perpetual itching without the benefit of scratching to the enemies of America. Speedy redemption to all the officers and soldiers who are now prisoners of war among our enemies. The Selectmen and Committees of Correspondence for the Town of Worcester. May the enemies of America be laid at her feet. May the freedom and independency of America endure, till the sun grows dim with age, and this earth returns to chaos."

The report says:—

"The greatest of decency and good order was observed, and at a suitable time each man returned to his respective home."

There are other facts of interest connected with the Common during the Revolutionary period which might be mentioned, but the time allotted will not permit.

More than 75 years ago an eminent

citizen of Massachusetts and a resident of Worcester, the Hon. John Davis, in an address at the dedication of the Town Hall, in 1825, referred to the patriotic spirit and bold action of the citizens of Worcester before the Declaration of Independence, and I think I can not do better in closing than to quote from his remarks on that occasion.

He said:—

"We have just heard much just praise bestowed upon the bold and overpowering eloquence of James Otis and Patrick Henry; but vehement and daring as they were, they could not have uttered their sentiments in a more decisive tone than do the humble records of Worcester those of its citizens. They could not have repelled aggression in a more resolute manner, nor more warily shunned the snares that were set for an unsuspecting people. The inhabitants could not be brought in any manner, direct or indirect, to acquiesce in the usurpations of the crown. They would not permit their representatives to be sworn by an officer not appointed according to the provisions of the Provincial Charter, nor to sit where the deliberations of the Legislature would be overawed by an armed force. Their resolution was to yield no right, to submit to no infraction; and if they could not enjoy the privileges secured by the charter, to establish an independent government, and commit the issue to a just God, if an appeal to arms should ensue."

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